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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an initiative designed to address the various problems that paraprofessional school personnel face in becoming certified teachers. Personnel directors from the Amarillo Independent School District, Texas, met with college personnel to discuss problems in helping teaching aides become certified in shortage areas. They collaborated on the development of "Successful Transitions: The Texas Educational Aide Exemption Program." The program is intended to increase the number of aides transitioning to teaching, retain educational aides, provide meaningful information and support to increase their likelihood of success in higher education, and help them attain teacher certification. It helps participants develop relationships with university mentors, understand Texas teacher certification and the teacher preparation program, understand the university application and financial aid process, enroll in a teacher education program, understand selection and scheduling of university courses, and demonstrate effective study and test taking skills. Many of the participants are working in special education settings, and many are bilingual. Often, they want to return to special education and bilingual classrooms upon certification. Participating students are interviewed prior to and following completion of the project to evaluate its effectiveness. (Contains 15 bibliographic references.) (SM)

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Successful Transitions:
The Texas Educational Aide Exemption Program

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American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education

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Context

Since the 1980's a teacher shortage has developed in the United States. Unfortunately, teacher shortages often result in the hiring of poorly trained and under qualified people, who do not remain in the teaching profession and who are not as effective in the classroom as certified teachers. Periods of severe teacher shortages are especially problematic for urban and rural areas, which often have problems recruiting and retaining qualified teachers even when there is a surplus of certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2002). Although American educators and policy makers are vitally interested in the quality of instruction in our nation's schools and have addressed the need for the development of effective teacher education programs, much more needs to be done. The nation's children must be taught by highly trained, certified teachers, who teach within their areas of expertise.

The National Commission on Teaching predicted that the country would need three million new teachers during the next decade (U.S Department of Education, 2000). This seems quite reasonable when patterns of student enrollment are considered. School enrollment increased from 44.9 million in 1985 to 46.0 million in 1991 (NCES, 1992), and according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (1999), the population between the ages of five and seventeen in the United States reached 49.7 million by 1996. Like the rest of the nation, the students in Texas schools are becoming more numerous. Demographers project that the Texas population will increase 99% from 1990 to 2030 (Texas Legislative Council, 1996).

These projections illustrate that Texas is growing and experiencing an acute shortage of teachers. According to Executive Director of the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), in 1999, Texas had approximately four million students attending its 7,053 campuses and is adding about 8,000 new students annually (Texas Association of School Personnel Association,

1999). During the 1998-1999 academic year, Texas public schools employed 250,000 teachers and needed to employ 26,000 new teachers during the 1999-2000 academic year. Texas prepares approximately 18,000 new teachers a year in 88 teacher preparation programs. Of these 18,000 teachers, however, only 79 percent will enter the profession. Of those who become teachers, 15 percent will leave the profession after one-year of service and approximately 50% will leave the profession by their fifth year of service.

As a result of the aforementioned trend of a shortage of certified teachers, school administrators are forced to deal with this problematic situation in a variety of expedient ways that do not foster the development of effective schools and efficacious instruction. For example, Choy, Henke, Alt, Medrich, & Bobbett (1993) stated that in 1990-1991, school administrators filled vacancies with substitutes (48%), others hired less qualified teachers (26%), and others assigned the remaining students to other teachers (23%). They reported that teacher shortages often results in students being offered less challenging course work, being offered fewer course options, and being taught by less qualified teachers; in this respect teacher shortages are undermining the intellectual rigor of the curriculum. After all, students will not learn about content areas and become effective problem solvers if they are not afforded the opportunity to learn about these subjects and are not challenged with higher cognitive tasks (Bruner, 1996).

It is especially unfortunate that under-qualified teachers teach our students because students of under-qualified teachers do not perform as well in core classes than do students of well qualified, certified teachers who are teaching in their specialty areas(s). For instance, Lacsko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that

> In reading, mathematics and language, the students of certified teachers out performed students of under-certified teachers…by about two months on the grade equivalent scale.

> Students of under-certified teachers make about 20% less academic growth per year than do students with regular certification [certification from a certified teacher education program] (p. 20).

In an era in which politicians, policy makers and teacher educators are stressing the need for educational reform and an increase in the standardized test scores in the core subjects, it is ironic that many teachers employed in the United States are not certified and that many of teachers who are certified are teaching outside of their major or minor fields. While school administrators prefer to employ certified teachers and assign them to classes in their specialization areas, this is not always the case. For example, only 67.4 percent of public school and 43.8 percent of private school beginning teachers were both certified and teaching in their major or minor fields in the 1990-1991 academic year, according to Rollefson and Broughman (1994). Unfortunately, with an increasing demand for new teachers, the supply of certified teachers is not likely to increase dramatically.

Texas is experiencing the same problems that are found nationally. The following chart reports the percentage of teachers by level who are teaching in their area of certification; certified, but teaching outside their certification area; and teaching without certification.

Table 1

Assignment Profiles of Texas
Teachers, 1996-1997

Level (Grade)	Percent Certified	Percent Certified and Teaching Out Of Field	Percent Without Certification /On Permit In Current Teaching Assignment
Pre K and K	74.7	12.9	12.4
Elementary 1 – 6	87.8	5.0	7.2
Middle/Junior High 7-8	71.3	5.9	22.8
High School 9 - 12	70.4	9.1	20.5
Special Education K – 12	81.8	8.8	10.5

Source: Texas Teacher Recruitment and Retention Study, February 1999 – Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and State Board for Educator Certification

The shortage of teachers in mathematics and science has been a long-term problem. Many teachers are not certified in mathematics and science, yet they teach those courses. It is not surprising that researchers such as Druvba and Anderson (1983) and Hawk, Coble, and Swanson (1985) found that teachers not certified in mathematics and science were less effective than teachers with the appropriate certification. Additionally, they found that schools that employed under qualified mathematics and science teachers did not offer their students advanced classes in mathematics and science. Likewise, Aldridge (1987) reported that only one-third of the nation's high schools offered physics and approximately three percent of our high schools offered calculus. More recently, Monk and King (1994) found that students of all achievement levels learned more from mathematics teachers who were certified than from teachers who were under-certified. Furthermore, the data revealed that low-achieving students' learning are more negatively affected when taught by under-certified teachers than are high-achieving students.

Teacher shortages, however, are not limited to mathematics and science. Choy, Henke, et al. (1993) found shortages in English as a Second Language and Bilingual Education. By 1991, over one-third of schools could not find qualified teachers for these areas. They further reported difficulty in filling positions in foreign language and special education. Similarly, Texas has teacher shortages in critical-need curricular areas.

The following table shows the extent of finding teachers in core subjects for the state's high schools. Additionally, the table shows the relationship between finding teachers in core subjects and the socioeconomic level of those high schools. Table 2 shows that fewer appropriately certified teachers in the core curriculum areas are employed in the Texas high-need schools than are employed in other schools.

Table 2
Appropriately Certified Teachers
Of Core Subjects
In High Schools in Texas

Quartiles of Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students	Math	English	Science	Social Studies	Foreign Language
0 – 21% #of Schools	85.3% [296]	81.3% [296]	82.0% [296]	78.8% [296]	78.3% [296]
22 - 33% #of Schools	82.1% [300]	79.2% [300]	80.5% [300]	74.4% [300]	70.9 [300]
34 - 49% #of Schools	75.8% [295]	73.1% [295]	76.4% [295]	72.0% [295]	62.1% [295]
50 - 100% #of Schools	73.4% [290]	71.7% [290]	74.4% [290]	70.6% [290]	67.0% [290]
All Schools #of Schools	79.2% [1181]	76.4% [1181]	78.3% [1181]	74.0% [1181]	69.6% [1181]

Source: State Board for Educator Certification

The pattern shown in Table 2 also is found in the state's middle schools. Not only are many of the state's middle school teachers teaching courses without appropriate certification, but also the problem is exacerbated in high-need middle schools. Table 3 shows percentages of appropriately certified teachers in the state's middle schools.

Table 3

Appropriately Certified Teachers
Of Core Subjects
In Middle Schools in Texas

Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students	Math	English	Science	Social Studies
0 – 30% #of Schools	69.1% [322]	71.8 [322]	76.2 [322]	78.3 [322]
31 - 45% #of Schools	67.7% [322]	68.1% [322]	73.4% [322]	73.9% [321]
46 - 62% #of Schools	67.0% [320]	69.0% [319]	72.4% [319]	69.6% [317]
63 - 100% #of Schools	57.3% [321]	63.9% [321]	72.4% [329]	68.7% [320]
All Schools #of Schools	65.3% [1285]	68.3% [1284]	71.7% [1284]	72.7% [1280]

Source: State Board for Educator Certification

Table 3 shows that the Texas shortage of teachers in high need areas will continue as our schools face increasing numbers of special need students, and it is critical that we produce more secondary teachers certified in the areas of mathematics, science, foreign languages, special education, and bilingual and English-as-a-second language. The State of Texas has recognized the potential of helping educational aides to become teachers and instituted a program entitled "Educational Aide Exemption Program".

This program exempts educational aides from the payment of tuition and fees while attending public colleges or universities in Texas. Eligible participants must be school employees, have at least one year of experience as an educational aide, demonstrate financial need, and be enrolled in courses leading to teacher certification. In addition to exemption from tuition and fees, eligible students may be exempted from student teaching requirements.

The Educational Aide Exemption Program appears to provide a viable opportunity to increase the number of certified teachers who have demonstrated an interest and dedication to teaching. However, educational aides face several challenges pursuing teacher certification. For example, all of the aides are employed on a full-time basis, and most are mature students with family responsibilities. The majority of these individuals are first-generation college students who have not been in the role of a student for a number of years.

In an attempt to address the problems that aides have in becoming teachers, personnel directors from the Amarillo Independent School District met with West Texas A&M University (WTAMU), Amarillo College (AC) and Texas A&M University System Regents' Initiative for Excellence in Education personnel to discuss problems in helping teaching paraprofessionals to become certified in shortage areas. They collaborated in the development of a project entitled "Successful Transitions- The Texas Educational Aide Exemption Program."

The Texas Educational Aide Exemption Program

The primary goal of the Successful Transitions program was to increase the number of educational aides who attain teaching certification in shortage areas. Programs were initiated to assist participants to overcome the barriers they faced in completing an undergraduate teaching

preparation program and becoming certified to teach. The program provided services that assist participants to

- Develop a meaningful professional relationship with a university mentor;
- Develop an understanding of Texas teacher certification;
- Develop an understanding of the teacher preparation program at WTAMU;
- Develop an understanding of the university application process, the availability of financial aid, and the process to effectively secure financial aid;
- Successfully enroll in a teacher preparation program;
- Develop an understanding of effective selection and scheduling of university courses; and
- Demonstrate effective study skill and test taking strategies.

The "Successful Transitions- The Texas Educational Aide Exemption Program" is based upon the belief that a greater percentage of these students will experience success in higher education and become certified as teachers if they are provided additional mentoring and support prior to and during their university experience. Therefore, the following objectives were formulated for the project:

Project Objectives

- To increase the number of students participating in the Educational Aide Exemption/Successful Transitions Program;
- To retain educational aides participating in the program and assist them in progressing at a reasonable rate through their coursework;
- To provide meaningful information, mentoring, and support to increase the likelihood of their success in higher education; and
- To assist educational aides participating in the program attain teacher certification.

Services from the Successful Transitions project are provided to the educational aides at no cost to participants. AISD, WTAMU, AC and the Texas A&M University System Regents' Initiative for Excellence in Education provide financial support for the program. Additionally, AISD has guaranteed a teaching position to every participant who secures teaching certification.

To initiate the project, campus administrators recommended participants that they believed would be successful in a higher education setting. The initial cohort included 25 students who are employed by AISD and who are enrolled or planning to enroll in an institution of higher education pursuing teacher certification. These aides appear to be highly motivated to make the transition from teacher aide to professional teacher and they have significant experience in the school setting. Currently, the majority of paraprofessionals in AISD are employed in special education settings; many are bilingual. Interviews of scholarship applicants indicate that many desire to return to the special education and bilingual classrooms upon certification. Individuals who participate in the project will be provided with the following:

- Each participant was assigned a university mentor who developed a professional relationship with the student, provided advice and counsel to the student, facilitated the student's academic progress, and visited the student's campus at least one time during the project period. Mentors will submit written progress reports during the project period.
- Each participant was provided with six, two-hour seminars delivered at the AISD administration building during the fall 2002 semester. Seminars were delivered during the school day and participants were released from duty to participate in the seminars. Seminar topics include the following:
-
    - Seminar I. Introduction.
      At this meeting, information was presented that focused upon requirements for becoming a teacher in Texas. Topics included an overview of teacher certification requirements, teacher preparation programs, college admission, and financial aid. Emphasis was given to areas of teacher shortages.
    - Seminar II. Application to the University and Financial Aid.
      Representatives from WTAMU and AC assisted students to complete applications (including on-line application) to AC and/or WTAMU. Representatives assisted students to complete on-line applications for financial aid.
    - Seminar III. Student Advising. Participants were requested to bring copies of any relevant college transcripts. Participants met with their mentors and received individualized student advising.

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- Seminar IV. Texas Academic Skills Program –Prior to admission to a college or university in Texas, students must pass the Texas Academic Skills Program examination. Seminar IV provided a comprehensive review of the mathematics components of the examination.
- Seminar V. Texas Academic Skills Program – Seminar V provided a comprehensive review of the reading components of the Texas Academic Skills Program examination.
- Seminar VI. Texas Academic Skills Program –The final seminar provided preparation for the writing component of the Texas Academic Skills Program examination.

Following completion of the seminars, participants were transported to West Texas A&M University to take the Texas Academic Skills Program examination, which is required for all Texas students entering a teacher preparation program in Texas. The project paid for the examination costs.

During the spring 2003 semester participants will enroll in an undergraduate course entitled *Schools and Society*. The course will be delivered by Amarillo College, and students who successfully complete the course will receive three hours college credit. The course is designed to assist students develop skills necessary for success in college including note taking, student habits, organization, and test taking. Additionally, the course provides an overview of the teaching profession. The tuition, fees, books and materials associated with the course will be paid for by the project. The course will be delivered at the AISD Education Support Center, and the effectiveness of the project will be evaluated based upon the number of students enrolling in a teacher preparation program and continuing in the program until teacher certification. Each participant will be interviewed prior to and following completion of the project.

Conclusion:

As the public school population continues to grow, the need for teachers is becoming

increasingly acute. Texas issued 13,319 teaching permits in the 1998–1999 academic year, an increase of 28 percent over the preceding three years. With so many teacher permits being issued, many under-qualified teachers are teaching our students; consequently, the temporary solution of issuing permits to ameliorate the teacher shortage problem only exacerbates the problem of making sure that every student in Texas has a well-qualified teacher. Having fully certified teachers is especially important because research has shown that the students of certified teachers demonstrate higher achievement than do similar students both of non-certified teachers and of certified teachers who are not teaching in their area of expertise (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, 2002). Therefore, the primary and lasting solutions to the teacher shortage is to employ and to retain certified teachers, who have the opportunity to teach within their areas of specialty, and in this respect, the challenges of teacher education programs are to find innovative ways (1) to increase the numbers of teachers they graduate, (2) to help new teachers remain in the profession and (3) to attract former teachers to return to the profession. Furthermore, as innovative and effective teacher education programs are developed, these programs must be replicated at other teacher preparation programs, so that the numbers of certified teachers increase throughout the nation as well as in Texas.

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